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A Turncoat's Self-Justification

By Ralph Chapman
Of The Herald Tribune Staff

Lowell Skinner, an American soldier, saw nothing wrong in refusing repatriation at the time of the POW exchange when the war in Korea ended in armistice.

Back in the United States after almost a decade in Red China, he still can't understand why his decision should have been criticized.

"I simply understood this armistice agreement like this: that if I wanted to go back to the United States I could and if I did not . . . I could go to China instead."

He did not stay with the Communists for ideological reasons.

"I would never get a chance like that to go to a big country and I thought to learn Chinese would be very nice. And I was, you could even say, intrigued by the idea that, well, they're different over there and they've got a different system going."

Nor did he return to his native land because of any belated sense of patriotism or even homesickness.

"Living standards (in China) went up. But anyhow, compared to American standards, it's low, and I thought they were too low, and I couldn't gain anything by staying there . . . I couldn't save any money."

As to the reactions of his fellow Americans:

"Well, if there's people sensitive about my staying, they can just be sensitive."

The 32-year-old former

Army corporal appeared in an interview last night on WNEW-TV. (The interview was taped on Aug. 9. Skinner is now with his parents in Akron, Ohio.)

Also on the program but interviewed separately were Allen Dulles, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency; New York's Republican Sen. Kenneth B. Keating, a member of the Internal Security Committee, and Dr. Albert Biderman, a social scientist who wrote a book about Skinner and the 20 other American POWs who refused to come home when first given the chance in Korea.

Skinner, an artilleryman, said he was captured by Chinese troops on Nov. 1, 1950. After spurning repatriation in 1953, he was taken to China where he became a lathe operator and married a Chinese woman somewhat older than he.

He indicated that, besides his "interest" in China, he was afraid of what might happen to him if he were included in the prisoner exchange.

"If you just read anything, even magazines (in the POW stockade), why you was progressive. If you did any work like the sanitation of the camp or something like that . . . that was progressive, too."

American prisoners who refused to have anything to do with their Chinese captors equated "progressive" with "collaborator."

Q. Did you have problems with the other prisoners? Were you accused of anything?

people who said, well, he was this and he was that. People said that but . . . I was more concerned with the good opportunity and this way I could go to China . . . I didn't think that there would be so much interest taken in this thing as there was.

Q.—Didn't you have any idea that many people would think it an incredible thing for an American to decide not to come home and stay in a foreign country and sort of turn his back on his own country?

A.—I didn't think it would

had never been a Communist and that efforts at indoctrination were no more than half-hearted, indicating that the Chinese had kept the American POWs more for immediate propaganda purposes than with any hope they might become useful in the future. This seems borne out by the fact that no real stumbling blocks have been placed in the way of any who wanted to return.

"In the beginning," he said, "we used to have a lot of lectures . . . but we got tired of that, weren't particularly interested in that . . . Nobody bothered me."

Perhaps the most revealing

glimpse of Skinner was his answer to this question: "Do you feel any sense of guilt at all about what's happened?"

"There's a bit of confusion in my mind on that point," he replied. "Like I didn't know it was going to cause so much trouble going to China like that, so in that sense I feel very bad. But as far as the actual happening, like I refused repatriation and went to China and now I've returned, and I'm out on discharge, dishonorably discharged from the Army, in that sense that's the way it has to go."

As to what should be done to try to prevent future defections like those of Skinner and others, the three who were interviewed later were unanimous.

Mr. Dulles: "I have advocated that we give more instruction in our schools as to the meaning of communism, as to the techniques that communism uses."

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